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Choose a Proper EFL Textbook: Evaluation of "Skyline" Series

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Abstract

For years, 'textbook' has been regarded as one of the main sources of teaching and learning in most EFL classrooms. Textbooks are useful from different perspectives in that they can not only help teachers, especially EFL teachers, to manage their course of teaching in a systematic way but also since they are always at hand, they can benefit learners as a good recourse even outside classrooms. Recently, the issue of textbook evaluation has grasped the attention of many educational administrations, syllabus designers, and teachers. Before selecting any textbook, they should be assessed in different dimensions so that it conforms to the requirements, needs, interests and also cultural characteristics of the intended group of learners. The purpose of this study was to examine the advantages and disadvantages of 'skyline' series (Brewster, Davies & Rodgers, 2004) being taught in some Iranian EFL contexts. To this end, a total of 75 Iranian EFL teachers were asked to analyze different practical, pedagogical and external aspects of the book based on a checklist developed by Litz (2000). The results of descriptive statistics revealed that there is a consensus among teachers that 'skyline' contains a lot of useful characteristics (e.g., attractive appearance, topic-based structural-functional syllabus, multi-skills syllabus, and real-life tasks and activities) which address the needs of Iranian EFL learners in a communicative curriculum. However, there are some few gaps that should be regarded and filled with other appropriate supplementary materials or teachers' explanations.

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1. Introduction

The role of textbook as an important element of any teaching or learning situation has been discussed by various scholars in recent years. For instance, Sheldon (1988) considered the textbook as the visible heart of any ELT

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program which offers considerable advantages for both the student and the teacher. As Hutchinson and Torres (1994) suggest:

The textbook is an almost universal element of [English language] teaching. Millions of copies are sold every year, and numerous aid projects have been set up to produce them in [various] countries...No teaching-learning situation, it seems, is complete until it has its relevant textbook. (p. 315)

Being a vital and essential element in the realm of language teaching and learning, each textbook should be selected and evaluated with caution. Each textbook should address the particular purposes, needs, interests, age and also cultural characteristics of specific groups of learners. They should not only contain authentic and knowledgeable materials with proper tasks and activities but also should be prepared and designed in ways that increase learners' interest in learning. Since no textbook is complete, textbook evaluation will let teachers to find present weaknesses in textbooks and try to compensate for them with proper supplementary materials and it also helps authors to revise and improve those gaps in their next editions. In this regard, the purpose of this study was to find Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions towards the appropriateness and suitability of *Skyline* series based on Litz (2000) textbook evaluation checklist.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *The Role of Textbooks in Classroom*

Textbooks as one of the main teaching resources play a crucial role in most EFL/ESL classrooms, in other words, textbooks are the second most important factor, after the teacher in language education (Riazei, 2003). In this regard, textbooks can help both learners and teachers in the process of language teaching and learning. Ur (1996) mentioned some advantages in favor of using a course book: First, textbooks give both teachers and learners a clear framework to follow. They know what is happening next or what the next stage is, so there is a sense of structure and progress. Moreover, it can be said that it gives learners a sense of security since they are aware of what is coming next and it may reduce their anxiety as a debilitating factor in learning. Second, they can be used as a systematic syllabus. Third, they are time saving since they have readymade texts accompanying with proper tasks and exercises that can be used in classroom or at home. Fourth, textbooks are cheaper than other materials like kits, sets of photocopied papers or computer softwares so they are economic. Fifth, convenience is another advantage of textbooks which are light and easy to carry around. Sixth, textbooks can be used as a useful guide for new and inexperienced teachers. Last, textbooks give learners some sense of autonomy in that they can give learners an opportunity to learn more independently. Ur (1996) proposed five general points against using a course book: 1) inadequacy- every learner has different learning needs which cannot be adequately provided by a course book, in other words, no particular book can meet all the requirements of a specific learning situation; 2) irrelevance- topics presented in the book may not be interesting for a group of learners according to their culture, gender, age or etc.; 3) limitations- it may inhibit the teacher's creativity or autonomy; 4) homogeneity- course books do not satisfy various levels of ability and knowledge or learning styles and strategies; 5) over-easiness- teachers can follow a course book too easily without initiative.

Since language cannot be separated from culture, most textbooks have been criticized for their inherent social and cultural biases. Carrell and Korwitz (1994), for instance, discussed that abundant examples of gender bias, sexism, and stereotyping still can be found in many EFL/ESL textbooks. Many EFL/ESL textbooks are also too inflexible and their authors subconsciously reveal their own pedagogic, psychological, and linguistic preferences and biases (Allwright, 1982). Finally, many ELT textbooks have been disappointed since they are often regarded as the "...tainted end-product of an author's or a publisher's desire for quick profit" (Sheldon, 1988, p.239). However, these shortcomings cannot weaken the strong value of textbooks in the educational world.

2.2. Textbook Evaluation

With the use of textbooks in classroom as one of the main sources of teaching and learning, textbook evaluation has been emphasized as an important issue since 1980s. Tomlinson (2003) defined materials evaluation as “a procedure that involves measuring the value (or potential value) of a set of learning materials” (p. 15). Ellis (1997) divided materials evaluation into three types: 1. *predictive* or *pre-use* evaluation, 2. *in-use* evaluation, and 3. *retrospective* or *post-use* evaluation. A *predictive* evaluation is performed to find the future or potential performance of a textbook and to determine what materials are best suited to their purposes. The other type of textbook evaluation is the *in-use* evaluation designed to examine materials that are currently being used. This type of evaluation can help teachers to find probable drawbacks and try to resolve them with proper complementary strategies. Once the materials have been used, *retrospective* or *post-use* evaluation can be administered to find out whether the materials have satisfied their prior assigned purposes.

Different reasons have been mentioned for evaluating textbooks. Littlejohn (1998) asserts “materials analysis and evaluation enable us to see 'inside' the materials and to take more control over their design and use”. Cunningsworth (1995) found textbook evaluation helpful for adopting a new course book or identifying particular strengths and weaknesses in course books already in use. Moreover, textbook evaluation can be conducted in order to select textbooks for a newly started language program, to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the books and to retain, update and/ or substitute the books (Riazi, 2003).

Being aware of the significance of textbook evaluation, it is essential to find the ways to evaluate them and the criteria to follow in the process of evaluation. Sheldon (1988) declared that since no one set of criteria is appropriate to all different situations, we can only limit ourselves to checklists or scoring systems. The evaluation sheets are based on a list of factors such as rationale, availability, layout, and so on. These factors are all being rated on a Likert scale (e.g., poor, fair, good, and excellent) by the evaluator. Checklists can not only be systematic and comprehensive, but they are also cost and time effective and the results are easy to understand, replicate and compare (McGrath, 2002). Moreover, available checklists can become dated according to the requirements of each learning situations. However, the criteria used in different checklists may not be culturally comprehensible to everyone which should be considerably modified in order to make them applicable to most local conditions.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the study were 75 Iranian EFL teachers with at least three years of experience in teaching English at different levels. They had taught different EFL textbooks and most importantly they had a good command on the materials being evaluated. Most of the teachers were female and about one-third of them were male. The teachers were selected from various language institutes in different parts of Mashhad. They were aged from 25-40 with a mean of 28.

3.2. Instruments

3.2.1. Litz (2000) Evaluation Checklist

One of the instruments used in this study was a textbook evaluation questionnaire developed by Litz (2000). The questionnaire, which consists of 40 items, is divided into seven main categories, each of which explores a certain aspect of the textbook. These categories include Practical Considerations, Layout and Design, Activities, Skills, Language Type, Subject and Content, and Conclusion. Cronbach's alpha (α) was employed to estimate the reliability of the questionnaire and it was revealed that the questionnaire had a reliability index of 0.81 which can be considered satisfactory.

3.2.2. Skyline Series

The series selected for evaluation was Skyline series (by Simon Brewster, Paul Davies and Mickey Rogers) which was first published by Macmillan in 2001. According to the author, skyline is a five-level program in American English, taking post-secondary and adult learners from beginner to upper-intermediate level and leaving them ready to embark on a TOEFL preparation course. In this study, the investigation was limited to the “skyline 4” book which is designed for intermediate level learners.

3.3. Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed among 75 Iranian EFL teachers and they were asked to complete it based on their thorough analysis of different parts of the book. They were required to rate each item in the questionnaire based on a 10-point Likert scale from highly disagree to highly agree, to reflect participants’ level of agreement. For this purpose, the questionnaire was collected a few days later so that the participants could have enough time to reflect on the questions. Later, these survey results were quantified and analyzed in order to answer the research questions.

4. Results

This study aimed to find what Iranian EFL teachers thought about *Skyline* series with respect to several categories. For this purpose, the data obtained in this study were analyzed through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS V.16) and descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were calculated. The results are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Result of descriptive statistics of main categories of checklist

Feature	Mean	Standard Deviation
Practical Consideration	6.60	0.15
Layout and Design	6.87	0.12
Activities	6.14	0.18
Skills	7.40	0.10
Language Type	6.66	0.12
Subject and Content	7.00	0.08
Conclusion	6.75	0.26

In order to inspect more, each section was analyzed separately and the results of descriptive statistics are shown below in Figure 1.

4.1. Practical considerations

As shown in Table 1, the mean score and standard deviation of *Practical considerations* are 6.60 and ($SD=0.15$) indicating that most teachers agreed on this part. As it can be seen in Figure1, this section consists of five items mainly assessing the view of teachers on textbook’s price, it’s accessibility, it’s publishing date, textbook package and author’s approach to teaching methodology, respectively.

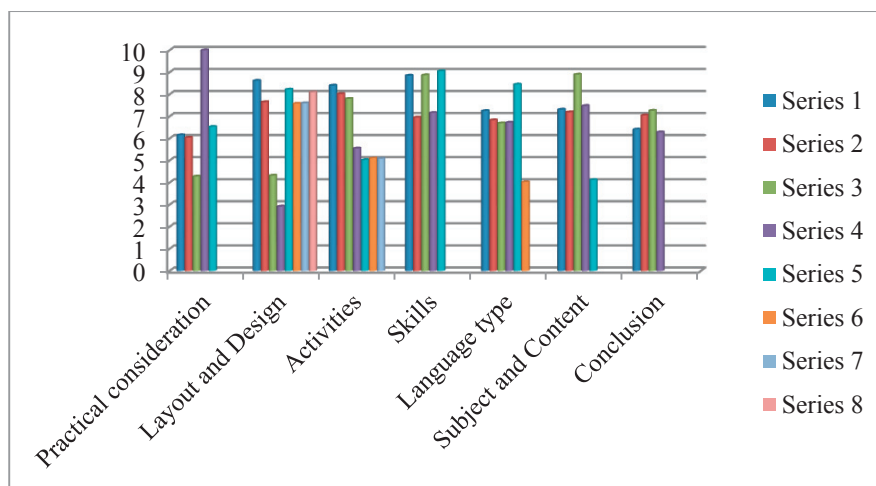


Figure 1. Result of descriptive statistics of each sub-section

The *price* of a textbook is an important factor that can absolutely influence the choice of a textbook. In this case, the teachers maintained that the price of *Skyline 4* is reasonable compared to other books in the market. Further practical concerns are accessibility and availability. In order for a textbook to be purchasable, for instance, it must be currently in print and readily available. The result of descriptive statistics reveals that this book is easily accessible and available. This book is currently in print and it has also been published in Iran since 2005 by Sonbolehs publication and moreover it can be bought on-line through different websites such as Khaneye Ketab (www.Ketab.ir). The results show that *Skyline* series does not meet the expectation of teachers as a recent publication. It was first published in 2001 and it can be said that it is not a new book in comparison with available books in the market such as American English File (2008) which is now a very popular book in different Iranian institutes. Moreover, all the teachers were highly satisfied with *Skyline* package and its supplementary materials. *Skyline* series contain a very complete package with wide range of flexible and ready-to use supplementary materials such as student's book, cassettes/audio CDs, song cassettes/audio CDs, videos, video activity books, writing resource packs, grammar resource packs and etc. Finally in this domain, it is revealed that the teachers and the author have the same views on the language and methodology. According to the author, *Skyline* adheres to a multi skills syllabus accompanying with real life tasks and activities that enable learners to develop their abilities in all skill areas. It's interesting and challenging topics meet the needs of the youngsters and pursue the primary goal set by language institutes, which is, to foster communicative competence.

4.2. Layout and Design

The mean score and standard deviation for *layout and design* of the series are 6.87 and 0.12, respectively (See Table 1) and it shows that most teachers were happy with layout and design of this book. This category includes eight items asking the teachers' opinion on overview of the functions, structures, and vocabulary; appropriateness and clarity of layout and design; textbook organization; adequacy of vocabulary list and glossary; adequate review sections and exercises; adequate set of evaluation quizzes or testing suggestions; the inclusion of guidance in teacher's book; and the clarity of the objectives to both the teachers and the learners.

As it can be seen, *Skyline 4* has a detailed overview of the functions, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation for each unit. The table of contents of this book provides comprehensive information about the lessons of each unit, functions, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar that will be taught in the textbook. The result also shows that *Skyline* has appropriate and clear layout and design. This course book is divided into 12 units, each comprised of

three lessons ending with a 'language for life' section. The course components are also effectively and clearly organized around specific topics such as tradition, men and women, goals in life and so on. The teachers had the same view that skyline is not well-organized since it offers different order of presentation of materials for each unit. However, this manner tends to make the book interesting and attracts the attention of those who prefer variety but is not good for learners who like familiarity of such a structured approach. As it is shown, the teachers maintained that there is not adequate vocabulary lists or glossary at this book. A close examination of the book revealed that there is no glossary at the end of the book and there is also some minor vocabulary lists inside the book. One conspicuous strength of this book is an adequate number of review units. Learning checks occur every two units and are divided into two sections: "progress check" and "proficiency check". According to the author, *progress check* parts are designed to monitor learners' progress and *proficiency check* parts aim to test how well learners can use the language. This second section also exposes learners to exam formats that they will meet in TOEFL and UCLESST-type examinations. Teachers also agreed that *Skyline 4* provides teachers and learners with adequate set of evaluation quizzes or testing suggestions. Moreover, it is observed that the teacher's book contains step-to-step guidance for teachers. *Skyline* teacher's book provides teachers with some useful advisory materials such as teaching tips, cultural notes, optional steps or activities and preparation post-it notes that can help them to teach learners more effectively. Finally, teachers found that materials' objectives in *Skyline 4* are apparent to both the teacher and the student which make the teaching and learning procedure easier and faster per se.

4.3. Activities

The obtained mean score of *activities* is 6.14 while the standard deviation is 0.18 (see Table 1) indicating that teachers were satisfied with the activities of this series. This section contains seven items eliciting the raters' responses regarding even distribution of controlled versus free exercises; sufficient communicative and meaningful practice; incorporation of individual, pair, and group work; introduction of grammatical points and vocabulary items in motivating and realistic contexts; the degree of creative, original and independent responses in activities; the degree to which the tasks are conducive to the internalization of newly-introduced language and whether the textbooks' activities can be modified or supplemented easily.

Based on the results, even distribution of free vs. controlled exercises can be seen in this book. *Skyline 4* is replete with controlled exercises such as accuracy-based fill in the blanks, scrambled words, matching, ordering, categorizing words, and completing sentences as well as free exercises such class debates and surveys, and information gap activities. Teachers also found that the tasks designed in *Skyline 4* promote both meaningful and communicative fluency in learners. Moreover, it can be seen that *Skyline 4* covers various activities which require individual, pair or group work. Results also show that grammar and vocabulary points are embedded in motivating and realistic context of real-life topics and texts in order to be learned more effectively and eventually. *Skyline 4* also provides activities which need creative, original and independent responses which should be done individually by learners. The teachers agreed on the fact that the activities also encourage learners to internalize the newly introduced language through engaging students in different recursive discussions and activities. Finally, it was observed that the textbook activities can easily be modified or supplemented in order to meet the requirements of each learning situation.

4.4. Skills

As shown in Table 1, the mean score and standard deviation of *skills* are 7.40 and 0.10, respectively which shows teachers' positive views towards the presentation of skills in the textbooks. This part tries to tap the raters' opinions in relation to subjects such as focusing on the skills students need to practice; appropriate balance of four language skills; paying attention to the sub-skills; practicing and highlighting natural pronunciation, and finally, integration of the four skills.

It can be seen that the book tries to focus on the skills that students need to practice. As it can be seen, most teachers were satisfied with the appropriate balance of skills. A close examination of the book reveals that specific

attention is regarded to speaking and listening. Reading is also well included in both the textbook and the workbook, although no specific section is regarded for writing which is adequately integrated into other skills. Teachers also found that specific attention is given to sub-skills including listening for gist, note-taking, skimming and scanning and others. It was also observed that natural pronunciation is also heard and practiced. A very salient merit of *Skyline* series is that each skill is well integrated into other skills for more practice. In each unit, different sections are assigned to integrated skills such as listening and speaking; speaking, listening and reading; listening, reading and writing and etc.

4.5. Language Type

The mean score and standard deviation of language types are 6.66 and 0.12, respectively (see Table 1). The results show that most teachers were satisfied with the type of language employed in the book. The Language type component encompasses six items (see Figure 1) that mainly investigate the opinion of teachers on the authenticity of the textbook; whether the language of the textbook is at the right level for the intended learners, progression of the grammatical points and vocabulary items in an appropriate way, presentation of grammatical points with brief and easy examples; whether the language functions exemplify English students will be likely to use in real situations or everyday life, and finally whether the language of the textbook represents a variety of registers and accents.

The results reveal that *Skyline 4* is full of authentic language representative of real-life English. It can be seen that some materials are excerpts from newspapers or true stories, real and authentic pictures can mostly be observed and “language for life” section at the end of each unit provides learners with skills needed by them in their academic, professional and personal lives. Teachers also believed that the language of the book is appropriate for their students’ current English ability and level. Moreover, there is an appropriate progression of grammar and vocabulary in the book. The difficulty level of the materials here progress in a linear fashion from easy to hard in a way that both vocabulary and grammar become more complicated step by step. Teachers agreed that *Skyline* presents brief and easy examples for grammatical points such as language assistant parts in the book and language summary parts in workbook. Teachers also believed that language functions exemplify English students will be likely to use. Functions such as describing people and places, talking about obligation and necessity, expressing regret, talking about future, getting ideas across clearly and others are covered in *Skyline 4* which suits to students’ level, age, and needs. The type of language utilized in the textbook is mainly Standard North American English and does not introduce a multitude of registers or accents.

4.6. Subject and Content

As displayed in Table 1, the mean score and standard deviation for *subject and content* is 7.00 ($SD=0.08$) which indicate teachers’ satisfaction about the subject and content of the books. This part evaluates the following five sub-components (see Figure 1): whether the subject and content of the textbook is related to the needs of the intended learners; whether the subject and content of the book is generally realistic; whether the content and subject of the book is interesting, challenging, and motivating; whether there is a sufficient variety in the subject and content of the textbook and whether the materials are culturally biased or portray any negative stereotype.

It is clear that *Skyline 4* meets the expectation of teachers about the relevance of the subject and content of the book to students’ needs as young and intermediate learners. Realistic subjects and contents can also be observed in different parts of this book. Interesting, challenging and motivating subjects are well included in the book. Different topics such as generation, big moments, war of the worlds, and men and women can not only raise interesting and challenging discussions among students but can also provide learners with useful skills that can be applied in real life. Teachers believed that there is also sufficient variety in the subject and content of the book which not only makes the class atmosphere more fun but it can also encourage learners to take part in challenging discussions. However, teachers found that the materials are somewhat culturally biased and portray mainly American cultures

and customs. They pointed to the fact that the picture on the book cover is from San Francisco and other countries or cities are mentioned rarely in the text.

4.7. Conclusion

The mean score and standard deviation obtained for *conclusion* are 6.75 and 0.26, respectively (see Table 1). This category exhibits teachers' consensus on total view of this series. This section mainly evaluates the views of the teachers on the appropriateness of the series for the language learning aims of the institutes in which it is used, the suitability of the series for use in small-medium, homogeneous, co-ed classes of university students, the role of the series in raising students' interest in further English language study, and finally, whether the teachers would select the textbook again.

Teachers concluded that the textbook is appropriate for language-learning aims of the institution. Moreover, its challenging and interesting topics or contents make it suitable for small-medium, homogenous and co-ed classes of university students. Finally, since *Skyline* book materials are related to learners' interests and needs, it raises students' interest in further English language studies.

5. Conclusion

The results of descriptive statistics demonstrated that there is a consensus among teachers that "skyline" contains lots of strong points which make it suitable for different Iranian EFL settings in a communicative curriculum. As for the most notable characteristics in each part, it should be noted that *skyline 4* has a very complete package and supplementary materials which can be used to the utmost advantage of learners. The table of contents of the book provides very clear and detailed information regarding what will be taught. Moreover, learners are supposed to learn the materials through an even distribution of both controlled and free exercises and tasks that focus on both fluent and accurate production. *Skyline* series also reflect multi skills syllabus in a way that it adequately integrates the four language skills in a variety of way. It also has very interesting and challenging topics and materials that are suited to the learners' needs and interests. Finally, all these main useful characteristics accompanying others are found to raise learners' interest in further language study.

However, there are some few gaps that should be regarded and filled with other supplementary materials or teachers' explanation. It is not recently published in comparison with other books in the market. There is no list of vocabulary items or glossaries at the end of textbook with their phonetic transcription in English. The language used in the textbook does not introduce various registers and accents and they are mainly standard North American English. The teachers also believed that this textbook is culturally biased and portray mostly American culture. Finally, I shall conclude with Cunningsworth's (1984) remarks:

No course book will be totally suited to a particular teaching situation. The teacher will have to find his own way of using it and adapting it if necessary. So we should not be looking for the perfect course book which meets all our requirement, but rather for the best possible fit between what the course book offers and what we as teachers and students need. (p. 89).

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